

Divine Literature and Human Language: Reading the Flood Story

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The discovery toward the end of the nineteenth century of Mesopotamian cuneiform texts that had a flood story—the Gilgamesh Epic (among other versions)—strikingly similar in details to the biblical flood story soon proved to be troubling to traditional Jewish belief.

The problem was that even the friendliest dating eliminates any possibility that the Mesopotamian accounts derive from the biblical story; the oldest fragments go back to early in the second millennium BCE, perhaps even earlier—long before the time of Moses and the traditional setting for the giving of the Torah and the account of the flood. As a consequence, most modern [secular] scholars today see in the biblical flood story a direct dependence on the Mesopotamian literary tradition.¹

Indeed, as Gary A. Rendsburg points out:

The Gilgamesh Epic was the literary classic of the ancient world, known beyond the bounds of the Mesopotamian homeland.... [Recent discoveries show] that at least some individuals in Late Bronze Age Canaan, at specifically a place that would become a major Israelite center during the Iron Age, could read the Gilgamesh Epic in its cuneiform original.... In short, the Gilgamesh Epic in general and the Mesopotamian flood tradition in particular were known in the Levant during the Late Bronze Age. Through such discoveries we can envision how an Early Iron Age Israelite would have gained knowledge of this great literary classic from the Tigris-Euphrates region to the east.²

(The Late Bronze Age is the late second millennium BCE—from Joseph or Moses through the Judges. The Iron Age is the entire period of the monarchy.)

These pagan sources, hidden from our view for centuries, are now widely available and are often part of introductory university courses. Reading them often contributes to undermining belief in the divinity of the Torah text. It is not that both the biblical flood story and the Gilgamesh

Epic should mention an ark, animals, birds sent out to test the waters, and so on; presumably they are both describing the same historical event. Rather the question is, why should the Torah deem it necessary to incorporate a well-known pagan story into its narration? Surely its pedagogic goal could be accomplished on its own terms without quoting and bothering to correct, so to speak, a pagan historical tale!

Perhaps even more troubling to the modern student is the suggestion that animals found in isolated geographical areas with diverse climates—kangaroos from Australia, tarsiers from the islands of Southeast Asia, wombats from Queensland, llamas from Peru, shrews from São Tomé Island, polar bears from the Arctic, and so on—all migrated to the ark and then returned home to evolve into myriads of subspecies within a few thousand years. Unsettling too is the suggestion that every human, whether living on an isolated mountain top in the Himalayas or a tiny island in the Pacific, is a descendant of one of Noah's children who lived not so long ago. Did their ancestors make their way from the ark to secluded islands and jungles only to cut themselves off from the world until discovered by Western explorers? The biblical flood story presents us with what seems to be another conflict between science and religion.³

All of these problems are simultaneously resolved with the realization that while the Torah was describing a historical event—the cataclysmic Flood—it chose to do so not in the style of a historical essay but as a literary oeuvre—divine literature, to be sure, but literature nonetheless.⁴

In his comments on the general importance of incorporating a literary approach into our study of Tanakh, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein writes:

... I propose, first, that we discover—or rather, rediscover—*kitvei ha-kodesh* as literature; and, second, that, in order to deepen our appreciation of them as such, we seek to approach them critically...

What we readily acknowledge with respect to language generally is certainly true of *kitvei ha-kodesh*: form and substance, manner and matter, are directly interwoven. To understand, to experience a *pasuk* fully, we best approach it both cognitively and aesthetically. Words are not numbers nor verses equations. The structure of a *perek* and the response induced by it are part of what it presumably is intended to communicate to us. The symbolic import of a phrase or a *pasuk*—what we call its “meaning”—is a function of the sum total of associations elicited in its specific context; and that context is a matter of form as well as of substance, of form insinuated in substance.⁵

Not surprisingly, this attitude is reflected in Rabbi Ezra Bick's preface to the new collection of Bible studies from Yeshivat Har Etzion's Herzog College. Rabbi Bick outlines its contemporary approach to the study of Tanakh:

First and foremost is the belief that Tanach is meant to be read and understood by the reader, without the absolute necessity of outside interlocutors.... If we are reading the text directly, then we are reading it as a text meant to be read, and this introduces the need to read using the tools of literary analysis. Of course, if the Torah is not a book, but a code or a mystery, it would be illegitimate to read it with the same eyes and mind that one reads literature. For this we have the oft-repeated principle, *dibra Torah belashon benei adam*. The Torah is literature, divine literature, written not in a special divine language but in the language and style of man.⁶

Of course, we are all familiar with the phrase "*dibberah Torah bi-lshon benei adam*." Rishonim, primarily Rambam, used this Talmudic concept to deal with anthropomorphisms in the Torah that clearly violate the concept of God as a non-corporeal being. At its core, the notion of writing *bi-lshon benei adam* maintains that factually true events may be described in words that are not meant to be taken literally. Thus we are committed to the truth of the statement that "God took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" while maintaining that God has no hand or arm. The sentence remains true because we understand that the Torah is using a literary phrase to report a true event. Indeed, we use *leshon benei adam* in our everyday speech when we say, for example, that the sun will rise at a particular time. We know that long ago there were people who actually believed that the sun went around the earth and that it rose each day. Few of us believe that now, but we regularly use "false" expressions such as "sunrise is at 6 AM" to inform others as to when the sun will be visible.

Leshon benei adam can also apply to numbers and not simply literary phrases. If I say, "many in Peloni's family died early but he died after ninety-seven years," I am saying that he died at age ninety-seven and not ninety-nine. However, if I say that he died "after 120 years," I am not necessarily suggesting that he did not die at ninety-seven but rather saying that he lived a long and full life. But what if I say that he died after 144 years? I seem to be making a claim that he actually died at the age of 144—that is, unless I live in a culture that speaks in units of dozens. In that case, saying that he lived a dozen dozen years is nothing more than saying he lived a good life, not an exaggerated number of years—just as our saying "he lived to be a hundred" means in our base-ten culture that

he lived a long time. In Egypt's base-ten culture, 110—Joseph's age at the time of his death—was considered the ideal lifespan.⁷

We quickly recognize seven and forty as significant literary (or symbolic or sacred) numbers in the Torah. The number seven is associated with the Sabbath, the sevenfold retribution against the one who would kill Cain, Lamech's lifespan of 777 years, the Sabbatical year, the number of days in Sukkot and Pesah, and so on. The numbers four, eight, forty, and eighty likewise have literary associations. For example, Kenan lived 840 years after Mahalalel was born; Noah sent out the raven after forty days; *berit milah* occurs on the eighth day; Abraham paid four hundred shekels for the Makhpelah Cave; the embalming period for Jacob was forty days; Moses was on the mountain with God for forty days; the spies went out for forty days; the Jews were under God's protection in the desert for forty years; a sacrifice is acceptable only from the eighth day onwards; forty-year spans are mentioned as periods of peace in the book of Judges; Solomon began to build the Temple 480 years after the Exodus; the people of Nineveh were given forty days to repent; and so on.

The original biblical reader was also aware of the Babylonian sexagesimal basis of numbers—that is, a system based on the number sixty. (We have vestiges of such a system in our retention of the system of sixty minutes in an hour and 360 degrees in a full rotation.) Umberto Cassuto⁸ hears this number system in the biblical chronologies. A full life is 120 years (twice sixty); an exceptionally blessed life is 127 (twice sixty with seven added). Mahalalel and Enoch are each sixty-five years old (sixty years plus sixty months) when they have a son. Noah is five hundred years old—that is, six thousand months—when he has children and six hundred years old when the Flood begins. The total number of years from the creation of Adam to the end of the Flood is 1,657: sixty myriads (600,000)—an indication of a very large number—makes 1,643 solar years of 365 days each. Add twice seven for a blessing for the new era of humanity and we have 1,657.

Rabbi Yosef ibn Kaspi (1280–1340), one of the Rishonim, had extended the principle of *leshon benei adam* much further than its value in explaining away anthropomorphisms in the Bible. As Rabbi Isidore Twersky explains:

Kaspi frequently operates with the following exegetical premise: not every Scriptural statement is true in the absolute sense. A statement may be purposely erroneous, reflecting an erroneous view of the masses. We are not dealing merely with an unsophisticated or unrationalized view, but an intentionally, patently false view espoused by the masses and enshrined

in Scripture. The view or statement need not be allegorized, merely recognized for what it is. Where did such a radical hermeneutic originate? How could Kaspi validate such an unusual methodological construct?

The key factor is Kaspi's use of the well-known rabbinic dictum: *dibrah Torah bileschon bene adam*, "The Torah speaks in the language of men," famous for its medieval use in the realm of anthropomorphism.... [Kaspi] more or less systematically extends the parameters of this philological principle to include issues and problems totally unrelated to anthropomorphism.... In its Kaspiian adaptation, the rabbinic dictum may then be paraphrased as follows: "The Torah expressed things as they were believed or perceived or practiced by the multitude and not as they were in actuality."...

If one recognizes superstition and popular error, one is in a position to neutralize or eliminate them. The Torah did not endorse or validate these views; it merely recorded them and a proper philosophic sensibility will recognize them.... *Leshon bene adam*, which insists that the text be interpreted in accord with all rules of language as well as all realia, including folk beliefs, enables the exegete to sustain a literalist-contextual approach, thus obviating the need for excessive allegory and yet not doing violence to philosophic conviction.... This procedure combines exegetical naturalism—trying to understand everything in the context of ordinary experiences—and historicism—noting cultural realities, differences in manners, habits, geography, expression.⁹

Let us consider a mundane example of expressing a thought using this expanded literary device of *leshon benei adam*. Suppose in eulogizing George Peloni, the late president of my *shul*, I say: "Our President George was a man of integrity. Not only could he not tell a lie, but he could not tolerate presenting a false image. When he had cut down his father's cherry tree and realized that his father did not suspect him, he volunteered a confession without having been asked." Every American fourth-grader will catch the allusion to President George Washington, but only such an elementary school child would ask how tall was the tree that President Peloni had cut down. Adults would realize that not only had President Peloni not felled a tree, but I was not endorsing, validating, or challenging those claims about President Washington. I was merely using, for better or worse effect, a well-known story with an understanding that an adult with a proper sensibility will recognize it for the literary allusion—*leshon benei adam*—that it was.

Of course, such literary allusions may be used in another clever educational way. To follow through on our example, let us imagine a late-eighteenth-century chauvinistic British educator, one convinced of Washington's real duplicity, who is about to send off his nephew for a stay in the former colonies. He might tell him of the first American president who, when asked, could not deny that he had cut down his father's cherry tree but who would not admit all the other damage he had done but that his father had not yet discovered. When his nephew hears the American version, he snickers at the Americans' inability to tell the whole truth about their first president. Of course, the integrity of such a British version hinges on whether Washington really was an honest person. But, in any event, the use of the story depended on its being well-known by the multitude, not on their believing that every detail of the Washington story was true.

Ibn Kaspi's approach has great importance for the contemporary Bible student. It means that when reading the Torah we have to be on the lookout for how our ancestors heard it originally. Rabbi Herschel Schachter's informal comments on understanding the meaning of specific biblical words apply to the entire enterprise of understanding the *leshon benei adam* of the period:

A lot of the non-traditional commentary works on *peirush ha-milot*, and on *pehuto shel mikra*, which is very important. We're not sure about the meaning of a great deal of Biblical words, and we follow the principle, "*kabel es haemes mimi sheomro*." If someone has a suggestion, we would be happy to listen—and some of the suggestions of the non-traditional scholars are *gevaldig!*... For instance, archaeology is discovering practices that existed years ago in the days of the Tanakh, and based on these findings, we can understand problematic verses in Tanakh. It is certainly a mitzvah to understand the *pehuto shel mikra*, and to know what the verse is talking about.¹⁰

Rambam long ago made a similar observation:

Just as, according to what I have told you, the doctrines of the Sabaeans are remote from us today, the chronicles of those times are likewise hidden from us today. Hence if we knew them and were cognizant of the events that happened in those days, we would know in detail the reasons of many things mentioned in the Torah.¹¹

Indeed, as Barry Eichler points out,

The use of such disciplines as comparative Semitic linguistics, ancient cultures, and even archeology for the study of Bible is

neither foreign nor really new to traditional Jewish scholarship. Throughout the long history of Jewish biblical exegesis, many of our *Reshonim* utilized these disciplines in their attempt to fathom the plain sense of the biblical texts and to interpret the message of Scripture.¹²

This approach is especially important when we come to understand the biblical presentation of historical events that—like the flood story, for example—have obvious parallels in the pagan literature of the ancient Near East. The time, place, and context of a story influence the way we understand the associated factums. If we read that some individual came to a convention and left immediately when he saw that turkey was being served, we might assume that he had a severe allergy to turkey meat. If we find out that he was an important Haredi *rosh yeshivah*, we might suggest that he left because he did not want to be seen as discarding the minority halakhic position that turkey meat was not kosher. But if we realize that he was attending the convention of a Modern Orthodox rabbinic convention being held on Thanksgiving weekend, we might assume that the rabbi walked out in protest of the rabbinic position adopted by other *gedolei Torah* that there was nothing wrong with celebrating Thanksgiving. This interpretation might be wrong; it might just have been a matter of allergies—but I would think that interpretation to be less appealing. Maybe the Torah was really oblivious to the pagan myths that were pervasive in the culture of the times when it presented its own narrative to an emerging Jewish community made up of members who were well aware of these stories. Perhaps. But the similarities are just so striking that it seems more logical to suggest that something deliberate from a literary perspective is going on here.

Context helps us decide whether a literary term should be understood literally. We are surely struck by the fact that the ten individuals from Adam to Noah lived extraordinarily long lives. Noah was six hundred years old at the time of the Flood. Should we read this literary number literally? If I say, “You waited ten minutes for me,” it might be an objective report on the actual time you spent waiting. But if I say it in response to your claim that “I waited ten hours for you,” it is clear that you were simply saying that you waited a very long time for me and I was refuting your claim by saying that the wait was only for a short period.

According to several traditions, the Mesopotamian hero of the Flood appears (paralleling Noah) as the tenth in the list of antediluvian kings. Ziusudra (the Sumerian Noah) had reigned 36,000 years before the Flood. In the Babylonian tradition the ten ancients were kings—in part demi-gods who lived tens of thousands of years. The Torah uses the *leshon benei adam* of ten generations but “demotes” the ten to the status

of humans who lived a fraction of the lifespan of these pagan gods and who, like all humans, were born, had children, and died. We cannot hear this *peshuto shel mikra* without knowing these texts of the ancient Near East,¹³ and we might confuse the text with a literal chronology of the world if we ignore them.

Rashi points out in his very first comment that the Torah is not simply a concise history of the world; it has a pedagogic purpose in relating events. One clear purpose of including the flood story in the Bible is to establish that God rules the world with a sense of justice and that He has established a lasting covenant with mankind that includes a provision to refrain from destroying the world. But the parallels with the pagan story reveal another goal: undermining the unethical pagan perspective to which the Jewish community was constantly exposed. And since this pagan perspective was being circulated in a literary form, it was quite natural to use a literary form to combat it. Indeed, in the very early periods of the emerging Jewish people, the transmission of the Written Torah to the populace probably was done primarily orally, given that it took a long time to produce and mass-distribute written texts. This would all the more necessitate *leshon benei adam* to make the point comprehensible in its oral format. The Torah's presentation is neither allegorical nor primarily interested in describing the actual details of historical events. Rather its goal is to undermine a pagan understanding of history by employing *leshon benei adam*—that is, as it was discussed by the multitudes and not necessarily as it was in actuality. Had we been aware of the pagan stories to which the Jews at the time were exposed, we also would have realized that the Torah's primary aim in telling the story was to debunk the pagans' notions of their gods' interaction with man. We missed that because the Torah has been so successful in wiping those notions from our consciousness that we could not imagine that a serious person could have originally thought otherwise.

Despite the point-by-point convergence between the biblical and pagan stories, the differences between them are much more paramount, as many have pointed out. In the Sumero-Akkadian versions, the Flood is brought for capricious reasons—in one, because the noise made by human beings kept the gods from sleeping. Their hero was saved not because he was, like Noah, a righteous man, but because he had “good connections” with one of the gods. Even minor details reflect this anti-pagan polemic. Utnapishtim (one of the names for the pagan hero saved from the Flood) relates that, when he thought the waters had receded,

I sent forth and set free a dove. The dove went forth but came back; since no resting-place for it was visible, she turned round. Then I set forth and set free a swallow. The swallow went forth,

but came back; since no resting-place for it was visible, she turned round. Then I set forth and set free a raven. The raven went forth and, seeing that the waters had diminished, he eats, circles, caws, and turns not round.¹⁴

The Torah's version¹⁵ not only takes pains to point out that redemption comes incrementally—the dove first comes back with a plucked-off olive branch—but reminds us that redemption comes not from the carnivorous raven but from the peaceful dove.

The Torah's message is driven home not only by changed details, but by omitted ones as well. We are often struck by the anthropomorphic quality of God's having a sense of smell that is mentioned in the Torah's version:

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking of every clean animal and of every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar. The Lord smelled the pleasing odor, and the Lord said to Himself: "Never again will I doom the world because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done."¹⁶

But ancient Jews hearing this rendition would have understood this paragraph as part of an *anti-anthropomorphic* polemic, because they knew the following version from their neighbors:

Then I let out to the four winds and offered a sacrifice. I poured out a libation on the top of the mountain. Seven and seven cult-vessels I set up; upon their pot-stands I heaped cane, cedar wood, and myrtle. The gods smelled the savor. The gods smelled the sweet savor. The gods crowded like flies about the sacrifice.¹⁷

Pagan gods smell the sacrifice and crowd around like flies. In the Torah's presentation, God, so to speak, smells the sacrifice and—far removed from any physical reaction—makes a moral judgment. He establishes a covenant with mankind, establishing a moral system and promising not to subvert nature again to bring destruction upon mankind.

The Torah understood how to undermine the common pagan parlance when first heard by the nascent Jewish community entering the Promised Land and was sure to confront these tales. The Torah provides the cure before the malady. How strange and unenticing these pagan versions must have sounded to our ancestors against the backdrop of a well-learned Torah version of the flood story!

When we read the biblical flood story as a *contrast* to the existing, parallel ancient Near Eastern literature, we hear things somewhat differently from when we read it as part of "the revealed history of the world."

We not only see things that we missed, but begin to notice the relative importance or tangential quality of various details.

For example, when some pagan text says that “the seed of all living things” was included in its refugee boat, we understand that we are not reading a prophetic statement conveying information that only could have been revealed. The pagans had no way of knowing whether, indeed, every species in the world, including those species from faraway lands unbeknown to them, was saved from a flood. They were using the word “every” in the same way that we do in the sentence: “He thought no one knew his secret and then discovered that everyone knew it.” We understand that this sentence does not really mean to exclude the possibility that someone in room—let alone the world—did not know the secret.

If the Torah had a specific educational purpose in retelling the story of the Flood from its ethico-religious perspective, we have little reason to think that its statement that every species was included in the ark was meant to give divine confirmation of that specific detail of the pagan story. Thus, for example, Rabbi David Zevi Hoffman argues the possibility that esoteric animals from uninhabited areas across the world were not included on the ark because the Flood did not reach these lands. He also notes in support the position of Rabbi Yoḥanan recorded in the Talmud that the Flood did not reach Erez Yisra’el.¹⁸ Indeed, the Torah tells us that the animals on the ark were to repopulate “*al penei khol ha-arez*”¹⁹ just as it tells us that the famine that brought Jacob and his family to Egypt was “*al kol penei ha-arez*,” “over all the face of the earth.”²⁰ Few people now think that the famine extended to every remote corner of the earth, and there is no reason to think that our forefathers who first heard this thought so. This understanding of the Flood frees us from such questions as how animals from frigid climates survived in the Mediterranean climate (let alone how they got there and back) and whether native Alaskan Eskimos, Peruvian Indians, and Australian Aborigines are really all descended from Noah himself.

How should all this find its way into our educational system? Applying this understanding of *leshon benei adam* to the biblical flood story may cause confusion and undermine a proper understanding of Ḥumash if presented too early in a child’s educational career. But that is not the same thing as allowing a teacher not to be aware of it or not to make it available when a student is ready to hear it. There is a difference between the educational decision to temporarily withhold information and an uninformed statement. Looking for the right time to introduce material is not the same as pretending there is no material to introduce. *Leshon benei adam* includes literary allusions, and that is the way the

Torah framed its anti-pagan polemic. True, we have no need for ancient Near Eastern texts to know the great Torah message that God, in total contrast to pagan concepts of the world, created and guides the universe unchallenged with a sense of morality. But now that we have these texts, we can better understand how the Torah taught these values to the Jewish people as they embarked on their national mission. In battling the pagan worldview expressed and disseminated by the way the flood story was told among people of the Near East at the time when the Torah was given, the Torah used the popular *leshon benei adam* of the period in telling the story from a Torah perspective and thereby promulgates its *Weltanschauung*. Since the Torah's presentation uses *leshon benei adam*, it need not necessarily be taken literally in all of its details even though it is a story of an actual event. Of course, this approach relates not only to the biblical flood story, but to the entire anti-pagan polemic of the first few chapters of the Torah.²¹

Alas, most of the Ḥumash classes in our high schools and tertiary *yeshivot* fall short of the mark in this area. Ḥumash study consists largely of piling exegete after superexegete on verse after verse with little literary analysis. And while one can lead a good Torah life without ever having heard of Gilgamesh, it seems to me that *yeshivah* educators would serve their students well by introducing it into the high school curriculum. When our own students learn about Gilgamesh within a Torah environment, there is less chance of a negative reaction on exposure to an anti-Torah interpretation of the same source material. Moreover, a literal reading of the text—one uncalled for when we understand its *leshon benei adam* construction—is needlessly seen to be in troubling conflict with accepted scientific findings.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing an important point. There is nothing in this presentation to suggest that the biblical flood story is not describing a real historical event or that it is simply a tale, metaphor, or allegory. We are discussing how the Torah chooses to present this history, whether it is concerned with details that would be appropriate for a historical essay or rather with overriding themes that would be appropriate for a literary oeuvre presented within the parameters of *leshon benei adam*.

For some people, the idea of reading the Torah against the backdrop of pagan sources seems off-putting. But throughout the biblical period, Mesopotamian civilization was a potent cultural force in the ancient Near East and, alas, one need not belabor the point that the Tanakh and Midrash consistently describe the Jewish biblical community as fully intertwined with the pagan culture of the area. Yet, as Eichler observes,

The challenge of acknowledging such interaction comes at a time in which large segments of Orthodox Jewry advocate

total separation from Western civilization whose culture is as morally bankrupt as the Torah's depiction of much of the ancient world; at a time in which large segments of Orthodox Jewry are rejecting science and the humanistic ideals of Western thought; at a time in which large segments of Orthodox Jewry are encouraging their young to withdraw from intercourse with the modern world around them.²²

We should be up to meeting this challenge, and the notion of “*dibberah Torah bi-lshon benei adam*” provides a vocabulary for explaining how the Torah used then-current idioms to put across its eternal message. We should embrace this understanding of divine literature using human language in our own Bible classes.

*It is a great pleasure to extend best wishes to Rabbi Norman Lamm on his eighty-sixth birthday. It has been a personally enriching experience to be associated with Rabbi Lamm from the time decades ago when he was a member of the National Advisory Board of Yavneh and I was on the National Executive Board, through my involvement on the Steering Committee of the Orthodox Forum (the “think tank” Rabbi Lamm conceived and convened), to more recent times when I had the privilege of editing his *The Royal Table Passover Haggadah* and *The Megillah: Majesty and Mystery*. Each decade has brought added appreciation of his contribution as a towering representative of halakhic Judaism, and of his ability to interpret traditional Judaism in an eloquent leshon benei adam that speaks to moderns in an authentic and sensitive voice. May he continue to enrich our community ad me’ah ve-esrim in good health and vigor.*

*I have explored these major themes previously in *Ten Da’at* 9:1 and *Tradition* 42:3.*

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(Endnotes)

- 1 James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2007) 76.
- 2 Gary A. Rendsburg, “The Biblical Flood Story in the Light of the Gilgamesh Flood Account,” in *Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria*, ed. Joseph Azize and Noel Weeks (Leuven, 2007) 115–127. Interestingly, Rendsberg argues that the fact that the biblical account as a unit so closely conforms to the Gilgamesh Epic counters the general academic view that the biblical version is a composition of two traditions, J and P—a mainstay claim of biblical critics.
- 3 Few of us, I think, are disturbed anymore by a conflict between science and religion as it plays itself out in the first chapter of the Torah. We are not bothered by the issue of the scientific age of the earth, as we understand the word “day” differently when reading the Creation story. We understand that this chapter was never meant as a science or history-of-the-world textbook, and we should also realize that all attempts to show how the Torah text corresponds to, say, the Big Bang theory, punctuated evolution, or the particle or wave theory explanation of light are doomed

- to ridicule a generation from now as these scientific theories are transformed and revised, as are all scientific theories.
- 4 Shubert Spero ("The Biblical Stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and the Flood: History or Metaphor?" *Tradition* 33:2 [winter 1999]: 5–18) proposes that "the story of Noah and the Flood is to be understood not as a historical description of a particular worldwide deluge that took place somewhere between 4000–5000 BCE, but as a metaphor to give the Torah's view of all the destructions and mass exterminations which took place on the planet from the very beginning" (p. 14). However, he offers no suggestion as to why the Torah would choose to base its metaphor on the literature of a pagan story.
 - 5 Aharon Lichtenstein, "Criticism and *Kitvei Kodesh*," in *Rav Shalom Banayikh: Essays in Honor of Rabbi Shalom Carmy*, ed. Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 2012) 19, 22–23.
 - 6 Ezra Bick, "Preface," in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach: Bereshit*, ed. Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (New Milford, Connecticut: Maggid Books and Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2011) xv–xvi, xviii.
 - 7 Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966) 226.
 - 8 Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part One: From Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964) 261. Me'ir Bar Ilan discusses the literary use of numbers in the flood story in Chapter 3 of his *Numerologia Bereshit [Genesis' Numerology]* (Rehovot: Association for Jewish Astrology and Numerology, 2003) 152–163. Mahariz Chajes discusses "the employment of numbers figuratively" in the Talmud: Zevi Hirsch Chajes, *The Student's Guide Through the Talmud*, trans. Jacob Shachter (Brooklyn, New York: Yashar Books, 2005) 224–227.
 - 9 Isidore Twersky, "Joseph ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. idem, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979) 239–242.
 - 10 Ari Lamm, "Torah Is Not Just a Collection of *Dinim*: An Interview with Rav Herschel Schachter," *The Commentator* (Yeshiva University) 5 November 2007.
 - 11 Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:50.
 - 12 Barry L. Eichler, "Study of Bible in Light of Our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northdale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1996) 82. The volume belongs to the Orthodox Forum Series, a project of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, an affiliate of Yeshiva University.
 - 13 An interesting example of new knowledge of the ancient period allowing us to see the literary quality of a Torah verse may be seen in the comments of the Neziv to Exodus 2:10, "[Pharaoh's daughter] called him Mosheh, saying, 'I took him out (*meshitihu*) of the water.'" Surely it seems strange that Pharaoh's daughter would call a Jewish baby by a Hebrew name when he was under a death threat for being Jewish, and that her knowledge of Hebrew was sophisticated enough to base the name on wordplay. The Neziv explains that *mose* is an Egyptian word meaning "son." (It appears in several Pharaonic names, such as Thutmose and Ahmose, where it means "son of.") Pharaoh's daughter is not word-playing, but rather is saying, "I will call him my son because his parents have abandoned him and I have saved him from the water." It is the Torah as narrator that word-plays by choosing *meshitihu* as the verb (Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin, *Ha'amek Davar* on Exodus 2:10).
 - 14 "The Epic of Gilgamesh," in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958) 70.

- 15 Genesis 8:6–12.
- 16 New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (Philadelphia, 1985), Genesis 8:20–21.
- 17 *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (see note 14 above) 70.
- 18 BT Zevahim 113a. David Zevi Hoffman, Commentary to Genesis, vol. 1, trans. (to Hebrew) Asher Waserteil (Benei Berak: Neẓaḥ, 1969) 151f, 160f.
- 19 Genesis 7:3.
- 20 Idem 41:56.
- 21 A lesser-known example of such *leshon benei adam* is the Torah's tale of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). It develops contrasting associations with the Temple of Marduk described in the Akkadian Creation Epic, and is a polemic against the worldview of neighboring nations, in particular Babylonia. See, for example, Elhanan Samet, "And Man's Loftiness Will be Bowed': The Sin and Punishment of the Tower of Bavel" (Yeshivat Har Etzion, 1997) 17 July 2013 <<http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/02noach.htm>>; and Hayyim Angel, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in Combining Traditional and Academic Bible Methodologies," *Conversations* 15 (winter 2013): 135–143. Samet notes: "The Sages... lived either in Israel or in Babylonia itself, at a time when the remains of Bavel's towers, and of the city of Bavel itself, were still recognizable. In Bereishit Rabba (38:8), a number of sages describe their personal observations of the remnants of the Tower. In their era, the pagan myth still had followers, and the link between it and the still-visible ancient ruins of Bavel, as well as the Torah's response, was natural and understood." Living in Babylonia, the Sages easily understood the *leshon benei adam*.
- 22 Barry L. Eichler, "Study of Bible in Light of Our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East" (see note 12 above) 98.